A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch) (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

Follow/Fav

Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Author's pedantic note: After some thonking, Same Sellero's name will be spelled Samé Sellero, and from now on Padme Amidala will be spelt Padmé Amidala for consistency's sake. In the future I will change past chapters to reflect this. I did this because I kept reading Sellero's name as same and not "Sah-may."

Chapter 49

High above Mandalore, aboard the *Tector*-class star destroyer *Daring*, Shadday Potkin sat in her quarters, contemplating her situation. *Kill Esera Komara, kill the rebel Mandalorian leadership, secure the beskar mines,* she thought. Three goals, all very simple, with enough applied violence.

But Potkin was a Jedi master. *Had been* a Jedi master, rather. Now she was a Knight of the Republic. Either way, she had a reputation to maintain. That upstart boy, Aspar, who somehow had become her superior, had lost twice to this Komara child. *Ridiculous!* Even thinking about Aspar made her seethe. It should have been *her* leading the Knights, not that fool boy in his fool mask, acting mysterious when he was really just an obsessive-compulsive whose compulsive obsessiveness was focused on politics. *He should have been a senator, not a Jedi!*

That was the problem with the Jedi way, though. No one knew how any of the children they'd taken would turn out until they were fully grown and a part of the Order. Nurture only did so much against nature. For example, there was that Komara girl at the heart of all this. Potkin remembered her, from before the war, the one time she'd ever seen the child and known who she was. The sniveling little girl had been hardly fit for the Service Corps. Her performance in the Initial Trials had been shameful. Now, six years later, her death sentence had been signed by the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic. *What did you see that we didn't, Olor Callo? Why has that worthless apprentice of yours returned to cause so much trouble?* Potkin had never liked Callo. He was a licentious libertine, a disgrace to the Order. His blunderings were mistaken for cunning schemes, his drunken ramblings were interpreted as sage wisdom. *Idiots! All of them! This is the child you couldn't kill, Aspar?*

No, Komara wasn't the problem. The Skakoan was. Aspar's report said the alien was a part of the Cyber Guard, whatever that was. Republic Intelligence had nothing on what happened inside Skako's thick methane atmosphere. His weapon was coated in cortosis weave. He had a blaster on his left wrist. This Skakoan had triumphed over Aspar while the fool boy was in nitrogen narcosis, and a short time later this Skakoan had kicked that senile old moron Yoda out of a Wookiee tree. In both cases he'd had the help of other trained warriors, for however much Komara counted as a warrior. Grievous certainly did, though. The third reported appearance had been at Zeltros, and that was entirely secondhand information from Kenobi, who'd heard it from that traitor Tano and the Sith witch Ventress. *That* time, the Skakoan had taken down Ventress.

Ultimately, though, Potkin was confident. The Skakoan would be a challenge, but she considered herself a better duelist than either Aspar or Yoda. The only Jedi she'd ever lost a sparring match to were Anakin Skywalker and Mace Windu. Ventress was no Skywalker or Windu. And Komara wasn't even an Aspar!

I've already won, Potkin thought. *All that's left is to make it happen.* She would end this traitor girl and her minions, and she'd bring Mandalore to heel, doing what the Republic had never done before. Having achieved what that boy Aspar never could have would surely ingratiate herself with the Chancellor. All that remained was the *how*. Orbital bombardment was too crude, hacking and slashing around with a lightsaber had no finesse. She wouldn't just stab with a knife, she'd twist it too. Komara had to *know* she'd lost. But how? Bluntness would be her only option if an opportunity didn't present itself.

Potkin's reputation wasn't like that of the other Jedi masters, who sat in their ivory towers, contemplating the Force and doing nothing of use. She'd spent plenty of time in the Outer Rim's furthest reaches before the war. In Hutt Space, there was a game played where one attempted to place balls in holes at the edges of a nigh-frictionless table using a long stick. The name escaped her, but she kept coming back to that game. The most elegant of players could calculate the perfect strike, to send the balls bouncing against each other and the walls until they ended up in the holes. Her plan didn't need to be that complex, but the idea of a single strike appealed to her. It was *elegant*. And thanks to the Chancellor's intelligence, she knew exactly where to strike, and at what time. She would attack with such total precision that she'd have this business wrapped up in a day. Perhaps she wasn't the swiftest warrior, but she'd be the most efficient and effective by far. And adding that to her reputation was an appealing thought.

On the other side of the planet, the rebel destroyer lurked, each ship chasing the other in an endless loop, around and around. Each ship had its spy satellites and drones reporting the other's movement, but neither had a direct shot. Potkin was content to keep it that way, for the moment. *It's just a* Recusant*. We'll shoot it down after I deal with Komara. One* Venator *is worth six of them. One* Tector *should be worth a dozen or more. And that little ramming trick it pulled at Zeltros won't work on my* Daring*. You're quite outmatched, this time, Komara!* Potkin smiled, feeling very satisfied in her position.

All she had to do was wait, and everything would arrange itself for her. The only thing that remained to be seen was just how crushing her victory would be.

Even through the transparisteel windows of the throne room, the din of the protesters still came through. There were always protesters in Sundari, in the weeks Asajj had been here. Protesting over the lack of food, protesting over meager water rations, protesting over the clone trooper presence, protesting that Bo-Katan Kryze had only made things even worse than they had been under Prime Minister Altec and Gar Saxon's Death Watch.

Altec was dead, Gar Saxon was imprisoned, the Death Watch had split. But the people thought they were better off under them.

The latest news had incensed the citizens of Sundari. All Old Mandalorians would be meeting somewhere in the city, to discuss unity and–as rumor had it–restoring the planet to life. Unity was one thing, but the idea of terraforming the glassy white wastelands had the New Mandalorians frothing at the mouth.

"You cannot do this, Lady Bo-Katan," said Prime Minister Vatai. He was usually a sad-looking creature, a hunched, weary man long past his prime, lacking the angular hardness so many Mandalorians seemed to have in their faces. His gray hair was falling out from stress and his clothes hung like bags on him. But the fire in the hearts of the masses burned in him too, today. "Duchess Satine would have never allowed it."

"Satine is dead. I am not," Kryze told him, as she sat on the throne.

"You are losing the loyalty of the people by the day. By the hour, now!" said Vatai. "The clones, the shortages, the Death Watch terrorists, we have weathered it all. But this is too far. Too far, I say!"

Asajj and Ursa Wren stood to the side of the room, watching in silence. Ahsoka Tano had returned from Vorpa'eli, she leaned against a pillar, an unreadable look on her face. This showdown was between the regent and the prime minister.

"You make it sound like you have the authority to decide such things," Kryze said, amused. "What are you going to do, little man? Complain some more? My sister's teachings forbid you to take any decisive action."

"There are more ways to act than simple violence," Vatai said. "Of course a reactionary like you couldn't understand that."

"Get to your point, Vatai."

"There is a reason why Satine didn't approve of the terraforming efforts. There is a reason those westerners have learned nothing, and we here in the cities have. Look out there! Look at the destruction, the devastation! That is what the old ways brought us. That must be there, always, to remind us of what awaits if we slip back into those ways!" Vatai jabbed his finger towards the dome wall, somewhere behind Asajj, Wren, and Tano.

"You propose that the people, whom you profess to represent, are only kept following my sister's ridiculous pacifism through a constant reminder of ancestral guilt?" Kryze raised an eyebrow. "Tano, Ventress, what do you outsiders think of this?"

"I think tha-" Ahsoka Tano stopped mid-word. She frowned, looking out at the city, where the afternoon sun filtered down through the dome walls. "I think that it's a sad thing. Collective punishment isn't right. Why should collective culpability be right?"

"But we all caused this, Tano," Vatai told her. "We *are* all culpable."

"I think Satine was full of it," said Asajj. "Pacifism never works. If you never want to be the one who shoots first, that's fine, go have your moral high ground. But let me tell you, violence is the only universal language. Even if it's your last option, it should still be an option. Sooner or later, someone will come along that you can't talk down. The only choice left then is who will be left standing. What idiot would back down then?"

The Prime Minister shook his head. "Things are not that simple, assassin. They never are. But I would rather die than live without belief."

"I could have Ursa Wren bring your family here, Vatai. I could kill them one by one. Would you do nothing then?" asked Kryze.

"I will do no violence, Lady Bo-Katan," said Vatai. "But what would you gain from such cruelty?"

"Dedicated lot, aren't you?" Kryze sat back on the throne. "The Dusala clan tells me that two Sundari residents lit a fire in one of their fields the other day. That's not a very peaceful thing to do."

"They started the fire far from where anyone worked or lived. No one was hurt."

"Except the arsonists. Chieftain Kentaroh executed them."

"They knew the risks. They died with honor."

"You can beat the fight out of a Mandalorian, but you can't beat the honor out of one. Even these pacifists stick by it," Asajj said to Tano. The Togruta just shrugged.

"You seem to approve of this arson," said Kryze.

"They were willing to die to stop reactionaries from restoring the planet," Vatai said. "I respect them."

"Live and let live, huh?" Kryze laughed.

"No, Lady Bo-Katan. We are the followers of Duchess Satine. We inherited her legacy. We will not do harm to another person, but we will take action when needed. And those westerners must be stopped." Vantai let out a long breath, steeling himself. "You do not understand. You're an off-worlder yourself, Lady Bo-Katan. I remember what life was like, before Duchess Satine. Before the dome cities. Huddled in tunnels and camps scattered through the wastes, thirsty and starving, dying of dysentery and fever, the weak at the mercy of the strong. This is the world your friends in Vorpa'eli want to return to."

"I don't follow my sister's teachings, and yet I have done nothing to force you back to our old way of life," Kryze said.

"Mandalorians must always believe in something," said Vatai. "We in Sundari, and in the other dome cities, we believe in your sister's path. You believe in your own. But as long as the memory of the horrors we passed through to get here survive, in that wasteland, we will know your path is the wrong one. What happens in a century from now, when your friends have made all of Mandalore green again? It will be as if the destruction of our world never happened. Mandalorians will slip back to their old ways, and it'll all begin again. What place then will there be for the people who set aside their weapons? These tribes in Vorpa'eli, they don't need plumbers, they don't need librarians, they don't need chefs, they don't need electricians, they don't need painters or musicians or poets or scholars. Everything we have built will be gone. The culture we have made will be gone. All that will be left will be the armor and the gun and the sword. Mandalore will consume itself in fire, and we will once again be roving bands of barbarians, plundering the stars, leaving nothing behind for those who come after us but corpses and ruins. Forgive me, Lady Bo-Katan, but that is not the future I want for my people."

The prime minister's words had stirred Tano, Asajj could feel that. Kryze was silent for a long while, hand on chin, looking out at the protesting crowds. Wren and Asajj, though, weren't buying in. "This guy is full of it," Asajj muttered.

"I agree," said Wren. They spoke in quiet tones, so that Kryze wasn't disturbed. "My clan lives in houses, just like these city people. We're not all savages like the clans in Vorpa'eli."

"This isn't about houses," Tano told them. "There are two completely opposed ways of life clashing here. The Old Mandalorians will win."

"You don't seem happy," Wren said.

"No, I'm not. I'm-" Tano stopped, and grimaced. "I *was* a Jedi, Lady Wren. I respect pacifism as an idea and philosophy. What Satine's people have built here is something worth preserving. There is more honor in creating than destroying."

"See what I mean, Wren? Self-righteous. Wait until you meet Komara, she's even worse," said Asajj. Tano rolled her eyes.

"I can't imagine what this Komara girl ever did to you," Wren said.

"She annoyed me, that's all."

Tano leaned in. "I think she's just angry that Komara's Skakoan beat her up back on Zeltros."

Asajj narrowed her eyes. "We will not speak of that creature!" she hissed.

Before either woman could take things further, their attention was yanked to the window by a sudden quake. The shockwave in the Force arrived just before the shockwave in the air did: the recently-repaired windows in the throne room shattered, and Asajj felt dozens of lives in the Force go out. The shouts of protest had turned into screams, and sirens filled the city.

"Death Watch is at it again," Ursa Wren said, putting on her helmet.

"Leave it to Saxon's people to go after these pacifists," said Kryze.

"Do you see now why we want nothing to do with your kind?" asked Vatai. The prime minister was ignored by all, and Asajj couldn't help but feel a twinge of understanding. As stupid as his philosophy was, the desire to be left alone was one Asajj understood on an intimate level.

Being surrounded by Mandalorians still put a sense of unease deep inside Sanya, but their attentive faces and alert postures did a lot to suppress that.

"So you see," Sanya told them, kneeling in the charred remains of scrubland, "fires like the one here aren't the end of the biome. Everything burns, eventually, that's how nature works. In a proper biome, there are species that fill the gaps left by fires like this. Yours kind of... got destroyed, so there's nothing here to grow in the ashes. But I'll bet you that you could find something on Concordia." She pointed up at the moon, a faint circle in the sky.

"Fireweeds," said a Mandalorian. "There's a book that mentions them."

"That's probably it, then," Sanya said. "Get some seeds of that, spread them in this, let nature do the rest. They'll be the first generation of plants to reclaim the burn."

That was basic knowledge. Most ecosystems had plants that filled such a niche. But none of these Mandalorians had ever known an ecosystem that wasn't artificial, either the glassy wastes left by orbital bombardment or the one they were creating now. None had ever even been off the planet, all they had were stories passed down to them, and infrequent holonet access. ComFast, Mandalore's holonet provider, was as terrible as they came, Sanya was learning. She was glad *Encounter* had access to Separatist shadowfeeds, which were far more reliable, and faster too.

At the end of Sanya's impromptu seminar, she caught sight of Kentaroh, the Dusala clan chieftain. For a Mandalorian, he was old, probably in his sixties. The elder looked out over the blackened desolation with hard eyes. "Some pacifists they were," he said.

Why are you reminding me? Sanya wanted to ask. Even thinking about seeing those men executed made her stomach twist. She could handle lightsaber and blaster wounds, but all that blood... *Isn't modern warfare supposed to be clean?*

"Even a pacifist can be brave," Sanya said. "I think they're braver than most."

Kentaroh grunted. "There's a blurred line between bravery and stupidity, young one."

"Yeah, I can't argue with that."

"They think we're savages, you know. Barbarians. Killers."

"You cut their throats with a piece of metal," said Sanya. "Are you going to put wheels on your speederbikes next?"

"We must preserve our blasters for the true battle," Kentaroh said. "It's messy, but what isn't about this planet?" He spread his arms, gesturing to the burned scrubland. "Do you see that hill, over there?"

"Yeah." The hill was maybe twenty kilometers away.

"When I was a boy, that's where the wasteland began. We didn't have anything but shovels and knives back then. We'd break the glass and push out the sand. Then we'd have to start adding live soil. Have you ever *made* live soil?" asked Kentaroh.

"Can't say I have," Sanya said.

"It's a messy business. Smelly." The old man's nose crinkled, but he laughed. "I'm not surprised they left it to us kids. Once we finally had enough soil, we'd plant the bushes, and wait. A lot of that soil died, a lot of those bushes died. But some survived. And we'd do it all over again, pushing a few meters deeper into the wasteland. Do you know what it's like, to look over your shoulder, and see your life's work behind you?"

Sanya gazed out over the burned area, and then to the faint line of green to the south, and the hill beyond it. She thought of Agamar, flying around from continent to continent, a never-ending chase of putting out fires and purging toxins. She thought of the other planets before that, where she'd accomplished nothing of note. "No... I don't," Sanya said.

"They've set us back years with this fire," Kentaroh sighed. "At least, if we were doing it the traditional way. These machines your captain is bringing us, they can do a lifetime's work in a year, you say."

"If you use them right."

"My grandchildren will know a green Mandalore. We'd expected our restoration to take a thousand years. We can do it in a hundred, thanks to you."

"Hey, thank Esera, not me!" Sanya raised her hands. "I'm just the technical one here. She's paying for all this."

"And that is why we're working with the usurper and the other outsiders," said Kentaroh. "You've given us a hope for a future we never could have imagined. None of my generation will live to see it, but that's a small price to pay for a future free of *that*." He nodded to the north, where the glassy sands glimmered in the sun.

"Those guys from the dome city didn't think highly of this future," Sanya said.

"The faithless have strange notions of guilt. We Mandalorians, the true ones, know that the crimes of the father are not the crimes of the son. Those creatures, who abandoned our way, think otherwise. Once guilty, always guilty, and it's carried through the blood. They cannot abide the idea of living free of guilt. They are spiritual slaves, held in the chains of the Kryze's lies." Kentaroh spat on the ground. "To know their ancestors were the same as mine makes my skin crawl. To see Mandalorians fall so far..."

In the next few days, Sanya asked around about *why* the Mandalorians of this continent hated their cousins across the planet so much. Always, it came back to the guilt. Many of the Dusala had not even taken part in the civil war, and those who had were long dead. Why should the Dusala of today suffer for the actions of unrelated individuals generations ago? Sanya found their logic reasonable. *We don't do collective punishment at the Temple, so why is collective guilt any better? Wait, I'm not with the Jedi anymore, there is no 'we!'* I *don't believe in collective punishment,* I *don't believe in collective guilt.* She wondered if Grievous was still reading her diary, because she put that down in it.

"Are you sure Miss Sanya will be safe alone?" asked Purity.

"Of course," said Esera. "The Tenaus are down there, and Kentaroh knows if anything happens to her, I will return with a vengeance."

"Is Miss Sanya's punishment at an end? You did speak to her, the other day."

Esera gave the biodroid a glare, as *Whirlwind* flew up to *Encounter.* "That's my business, Purity, not yours."

From behind them, in the passenger seats, Murshida chuckled. "Leave the Captain's personal life to her, Miss Alpha. She'll do what's right, sooner or later."

"Mybusiness, Mister Murshida!"

"I'm afraid it's mine too. You were distressed after yesterday's events."

Vaguely, Esera remembered agreeing to discuss *that* event in the future. That future was now. "I was momentarily disturbed," she said. In fact, she hadn't slept at all last night. The two New Mandalorians dying hadn't bothered her, their blood staining the white sand of the wasteland hadn't bothered her, no. The lack of feeling as two lives were snuffed out right in front of her had been the problem. Esera knew she was supposed to feel something like that in the Force. She hadn't.

This wasn't new. Esera had killed plenty of people in the past and not felt their deaths. But she'd rationalized it: either she died, or they did. She made the choice any soldier would, and killed before she was killed. That Neimoidian during the coup, Riberre's Zeltron thugs and the drug lord himself, those Sun Guard on Emberlene, they'd all been her enemies. Seeing two men killed in cold blood had left her with that same lack of feeling. *That* was the new twist that bothered her. If she could no longer sense even murder in the Force, what did that say about her? What was she becoming?

"Actually, Mister Murshida, I don't think this is a conversation I want to have," said Esera.

"Is that wise, Captain?" the old Skakoan asked. "Alize often says you keep too much to yourself."

"Alize can mind her own business as well."

As soon as *Whirlwind* touched down, Esera made a straight line for the bridge. It was good to be back aboard. Mandalore was warm and dusty, *Encounter* was blessedly cool and clean. Maybe she'd sleep better back in her own bed on her own ship. She dismissed Murshida so that he could return to his pressure chamber and get time out of his suit, but Purity and the magnaguards tagged along, unshakable as per Grievous's instructions some few weeks ago.

On the bridge, Commander Miha Voyan was *not* in the captain's chair, he was up at the navigator's station with Ensign Shau Meo. "Interesting choice of exit trajectory," Voyan was saying, looking over the Felinian boy's shoulder. "You know that'll take us dangerously close to a neutron star, right?"

"That's the idea," said Meo, "I think I can get us closer to the gravity well than the computer can. I know I can! It'd save us hours of travel time, maybe even a day-"

Esera's presence registered with the two men. Voyan straightened up, and saluted. "Welcome back, Captain Komara."

"Captain Komara!" Meo sprang out of his chair, but his foot caught on an exposed wire and he went careening into Voyan, knocking them both against the control panel. The engineer took the collision stoically as he did just about anything else.

"I'd say at ease, but Ensign Meo seems to have already taken it," said Esera.

"Ensign Meo and I were going over escape routes, in case that *Tector* makes a move," Voyan told her, as he pulled Meo up straight. For whatever reason, she liked seeing Miha Voyan and Shau Meo together. The cold, reserved engineer and the bubbly, spirited navigator played off each other well. That Meo invaded Voyan's personal space like, well, a cat, amused Esera to no end too. *They make a cute pair*. That notion popped into her head on its own, bringing a sudden flush to her cheeks. *Oh, I need to do something about these invasive thoughts...* But such thoughts were preferable to dwelling on other things.

"We're ready, Captain!" Meo declared, pulling his uniform jacket into order, tail twitching, ears perked up. "Once this, um, *Tector* starts trouble, we'll be halfway to... somewhere, before they can even get in fighting range!"

"Have you considered the possibility we may have to fight them?" Esera asked. Meo blanched.

"Commander Voyan says we don't stand a chance in a battle against that Star Destroyer," he said.

Esera crossed her arms, and glared at Voyan. "Has Commander Voyan told you of how we crippled a star destroyer at Zeltros?"

The Felinian boy's ears twitched, but Voyan spoke: "Captain, that trick nearly destroyed us too, and this *Tector* doesn't have an exposed hangar to ram our ship into. And speaking as your chief engineer, *Encounter* isn't going to survive another collision like that. Assuming we even got close enough. Look at this." The engineer brought up a hologram of the star destroyer. At first glance, Esera couldn't tell it apart from the *Imperator*. But the longer she looked, the more she noticed: its superstructure was more built up, it lacked the large ventral hangar and protruding reactor bulb, and it had far, far more guns. "Twelve dual heavy turbolaser turrets, each one a match for guns on our prow. Two more dual ion cannon turrets. Who knows how many lighter weapons are on it, we haven't had scans detailed enough. This is a ship-killer, Captain."

"Their hangar can't hold any more small craft than ours, though. It can't field its own fighter screen."

"And if we were in a *Providence* or *Lucrehulk* that might matter. We can't field a fighter screen either, Captain."

If the Republic decides to attack us, there's not much we can do, Esera realized. Their position at Mandalore suddenly became far less secure than she'd thought.

"If they can end us any time they want, then why haven't they?" asked Meo, one ear dipping down in confusion.

"There must be more to the situation than we know," said Esera. "Rules of engagement, particular orders, maybe even an inability to actually fight us."

"Then strike when the prey is weak, Captain!" said the Felinian, fist in palm. "That's what my father says."

"But are they weak? Or are they waiting?" Voyan asked. The question threw Meo back into doubt, one of his ears dipped again.

Esera made her choice. "They must be waiting, and I'm going to use that in every way I can. Voyan, prepare to receive a guest. We have a princess arriving soon."

"A princess?" Voyan raised an eyebrow. "There's never a dull moment with you around. We had a week of quiet up here, but the moment you get back, there's a princess on her way..." He shook his head. "Very well, Captain, I'll tell Alize to put that royal palace experience to use. That's about all we can do to make this ship princess-ready."

Three minutes late. Ardabur Aspar was three minutes late to his daily briefing with Tarkin. Republic Intelligence agents had lost track of Aspar two hours before he was supposed to go see Maul, too. It didn't take a genius to draw a conclusion.

"Enjoying your meetings with Maul, General Aspar?" he asked, when the Knight walked into the Chancellor's office.

His mask shielded his reaction, but Tarkin noticed the slight shift in how he held himself- his arms twitched, as if to cross, a sign of emotional and physical distancing in most Humans. "You're very sharp, my lord," said Aspar. "Maul is the last of the Sith. I am no longer a Jedi. Can I be blamed, if I am curious about the ways of my former foe? How they survived for so long, unnoticed? How Sidious took over the Republic from the inside, before his untimely demise? It's fascinating. There is much to learn from the Sith."

"Sith or Jedi, whichever ancient religion you choose, it makes no difference to me," Tarkin said. "Or to anyone else outside that wretched temple for that matter. How goes Maul's progress?"

"He's excited, my lord. The historical value of this holocron is beyond any price. I'm having to keep him focused on the search for the weapon Sidious believed was in that thing, but I keep catching him looking into other branches of the holocron's memory. Translating Old Sith into modern Basic takes time. Word order is a suggestion at best, and the declension and tonal system is arcane, to put it lightly. At least it's not context-reliant, though. We'd be finished if it were."

Tarkin knew enough about linguistics to agree, so he nodded. "Any progress is good progress. What have we learned from the holocron? Be specific, Aspar."

"Several Force techniques were described in detail, particularly relating to mind control. If we used these techniques on a high-ranking Separatist and they happened to escape imprisonment, making their way back to Grievous..." Aspar shrugged. "Who knows what we could achieve?"

"Is there anything at all of military value? Something *I* could use, not any magic spell."

Tarkin had the feeling Aspar was smiling under his mask; the man leaned forward. "We found a map. Some of the locations in it are not known even in the Jedi Archives, and those were taken from the Star Map on Dantooine. There may be untouched Rakatan troves out there. I suggest dispatching teams immediately, sir."

"Yes, that sounds promising," Tarkin said, adding that note to his datapad. "Anything else?"

"This holocron was made before the revolt of the Sith against the Rakatans. They were ruled over by a certain Rakatan warlord in this time, who had aspirations of creating his own empire. Maul thinks this was why Sidious had *this* holocron in mind. It may not have been a simple gift to King Adas, but a back-up archive for this warlord should the worst happen." Aspar paused. "Maul thinks this holocron contains a lot more than its showing us. He just hasn't found a way to reveal it yet."

Tarkin frowned. "Does he have any proof?"

"The holocron thinks the two of us are Sith. It makes no difference between actual Sith, Zabrak, or Human. Maul said the holocron thinks like a Rakatan, unable or unwilling to distinguish between slave races. But if the holocron is making a distinction of slave or Rakatan between its users in the first place-"

"Then it may react differently if it thinks you're Rakatans," Tarkin said. "Yes, I see. How do you intend to fake this? The last Rakatans died out thousands of years ago."

"Let me know what your men find, following that map, and we'll think of something," said Aspar.

For a second, Tarkin considered sending Aspar himself. He wanted to play this holocron business close to the chest. But if he sent the Knight away, then he'd have one less handle on Maul. And if Maul were left alone... Tarkin shook his head. "No, this is too important to trust to any lackey. I think it's time the Chancellor had a moment out of the spotlight."

Aspar gave a start. "My lord, you can't be serious-"

"I am *quite* serious. Tell Maul he's going to get to see the world outside his workspace sooner than he expected. All three of us are going. And Greejatus too, I think."

Pride of Sellero was an ostentatious name, Esera felt. The *Marauder*-class corvette didn't look the part: Samé Sellero, self-proclaimed princess of Penhalla, had run her ship rough. The corvette was scorched by blaster marks, in some places the armor had crumpled or melted, and *Encounter*'s computer thought her sensor suite was blind somewhere on the port side, because *Pride of Sellero* was coming in at an angle, showing her starboard only. Not that it'd matter, *Encounter*'s primary turbolaser battery put out more power in a salvo than the corvette's reactor did in a minute. Behind the corvette came a freighter, an equally-battered GR-45 freighter, and a collection of Z-95 starfighters.

"Anything I should know about this Sellero woman?" asked Esera, as she, Buna, Murshida, Purity, and the magnaguards, plus Voyan, made their way to the main airlock. Her hopes for sleep had been dashed, her mind had strolled through the past and all its unpleasantness, and then into the future, and what might await her and the people she cared about. She'd been tired before it had even been tomorrow, and now that tomorrow was today, Esera was not in a good mood at all. But when was she, these days? *Get it together, Esera,* she told herself.

"Well, let's see..." Buna said, her smile showing a row of sharp teeth. "She's a little fusion bomb of a girl, but she ain't a girl. By my math she oughta' be thirty-four now. A respectable age for a Human, right? Woulda' made a good Barabel, in another life. Big personality, knows violence solves problems. As you Humans say, her bite is as bad as her bark!"

"Most Humans are respectable by that age," said Voyan. "You've got the saying wrong, though. It's 'her bark is worse than her bite.'"

"I like mine better." Buna turned up her nose.

In Esera's experience, age and respectability didn't always go together. *Just look at you two, if you need any more proof of that!* thought Esera,unable to imagine Buna and Voyan as anything other than what they were: an ornery has-been pirate and ornery holodrama actor engineer.

"I anticipate Samé Sellero will cause problems for this ship," Purity said. "A fusion bomb one does not have the arming code for is a bomb that should stay on the other side of that airlock."

Outside that airlock, *Pride of Sellero* was linking with *Encounter*'s docking tube. A gentle shudder in the floor panels gave the sign that the ships had linked. *No going back now!*

"Bring it on," said Esera. Voyan cycled the lock, and the light above turned green.

In came Samé Sellero, with as arrogant a strut as Esera had ever seen. Her black overcoat hung off her shoulders, revealing a faux-military uniform, also black, with the most scandalously short skirt and lewdly low neckline Esera had ever seen, short of spaceport prostitutes. In real color, she seemed a distant cousin of Padmé Amidala, with her long dark hair, big brown eyes, and exquisitely-shaped face, a woman who looked more at home in high society than on a dingy old starship. But those lifted boots and that tall peaked cap did nothing to disguise the fact Sellero was barely taller than Sanya. Even with those dumb boots, she had to look *up* at Esera, if ever so slightly. And that gave Esera something to smile about for the first time today.

"Princess Samé Sellero, welcome to *Encounter*," she said. The first Human, who wasn't Stalimurian or a literal child, that looked *up* at her! Esera was giddy, guiltily giddy. That voice inside her, raised by the Jedi, told her she should be ashamed of being so petty. Esera ignored it.

"Old lizard!" Sellero barked, and for a second, Esera didn't realize she was referring to Buna. "What the hell have you gotten me into this time?"

"Little princess," Buna growled, showing all her fangs in ferocious grin. "You should be on your knees thankin' me for this job, after that scuffle at Circumtore. That dinky ship of yours has taken quite a beatin'. From Hutts, no less!"

"At least I *have* a ship," said Sellero.

"Careful, girl, I'll bite that pretty head right off your shoulders."

"Make a move, grandma!"

Buna only snorted, the kind of snort she made when she approved of something, if not necessarily liking it. That ended their exchange, and Esera sensed no hostility from either of them towards each other. *Barabels and pirates, not my world,* she thought.

"So, Lady Komara, is it?" Sellero asked, turning back to her. "Hell of a time to be getting into terraforming on Mandalore. This system is crawling with Mando mercenary outfits, and in case you didn't know, there's a bloody star destroyer on the other side of this planet! If it wasn't the millions you owe me I'd have jumped out of here the moment that *Tector* turned up on the scanners."

"Leave the star destroyer to us," Esera told her. "As we agreed, half your payment on arrival." She waved Murshida forward, with a case full of ingots. The Skakoan dwarfed the pirate princess, but she wasn't cowed at all.

"Count 'em up, kid," Sellero said.

Esera had hardly noticed Sellero's entourage. The half-dozen men behind her were all tough-looking, bare arms covered in tattoos... Except for one: a solidly-built youth with a short beard and a nervous disposition, wearing some kind of wide-brimmed hat, that looked like it should be worn on some agriworld ranch and not a starship.

"Yes, princess," the kid answered, gulping as he stepped into Murshida's shadow.

"You don't trust me?" Esera asked Sellero.

"A noble lady of Raxus might not understand this, but in my business, you always count the money," Sellero said. "Honor among thieves? Yeah, right!" She reached into an inner pocket of the coat hanging off her shoulders, pulling out a silver case of deathsticks.

"Do *not* smoke on my ship," Esera told her, putting her hands on her hips.

"You really have that little faith in your air filters?" asked Sellero, raising an eyebrow. "I mean, I believe it, given the absolute state of this place."

"No, I just don't want you smoking on my ship," Esera said.

Sellero rolled her eyes, but put the case away. "You'd get along with this kid, Lady Komara. He's as straight-edge as you are. We picked him up at Terminus last year, a passenger on a freighter who'd boarded at Gatalenta. He calls himself *Trapper Wolf*!" The pirate princess cackled, and Buna made her rumbling laugh. Trapper Wolf, the young man counting credit ingots, went as red as Murshida's robe. Oddly enough, Voyan's Force-presence had changed from at ease to wary at the mention of Gatalenta. "I know, everyone's running from something, right? Kid wants to take a new name, I'll respect that. But really? *Trapper Wolf?*"

"There are worse names," Esera said, glancing between the two. *I'm not here to make enemies, but I don't want to bully this kid either. Kid? He's my age! Am I a kid? Not at all!* "Gatalenta's a nice planet, I heard. I can't imagine what drove him out here."

"Naboo is beautiful, they say. But here I am, a lovely princess, stuck out here with the rest of you." Sellero's smirk radiated with smug energy. "We've all got our pasts, Komara."

"Please respect Captain Komara's status as a peer of Raxus, your highness," said Purity.

The pirate clapped. "Finally, someone who knows how to treat royalty! What's your name, lovely?"

"I am Purity Alpha-"

"Now *that* is a name! You hear that, Trapper? Purity Alpha!"

"I hear it, princess," Trapper Wolf mumbled.

"You look like a real man-eater, Purity, I could use a girl like you," Sellero told the biodroid. "This war just keeps getting crazier. Look at us! Here at Mandalore of all places, staring down the guns of a Republic star destroyer..."

"I am not a man-eater, your highness," Purity told her. "I have never tasted sentient male flesh in my entire life."

"And how long is that, dear?"

"Approximately five months." Samé Sellero stared, her smugness shattered into confusion and bewilderment. Purity looked at Esera. "Captain, you told me my exact figures unnerved people, but my vagueness has caused her highness great discomfort."

"Her highness doesn't realize you're a biodroid, Purity," said Esera. Sellero's men took a renewed interest in Purity, and even Trapper Wolf took a moment to look at her. The looks in some of their eyes were not innocent at all.

"A biodroid, a real biodroid," Sellero said, in a soft voice bordering on awe. She reached up, her heels lifting off the deck as she stretched, and put a hand on Purity's cheek. "You're so warm. So real. You are beautiful, Purity. Truly beautiful."

Purity's face lit up with a blush, and she blinked. Of all people present, it was the engineer she turned to. "Commander Voyan, this is a new physical sensation. I have observed it many times in the Captain, but now it is happening to me."

Many times!? Esera felt a heat in her face at the accusation.

"I'm not sure what to tell you," Voyan said. "This is just a thing that happens in most Humanoids."

"I would have thought you knew, Commander. You are the one responsible for my physical appearance."

Sellero was broken from her reverie, and she turned on Voyan with a smile that could have fit a shark. "So *you're* the one who made this astonishingly gorgeous masterpiece. I should have known, a guy like you could never snag a woman like this. I must commend you for your taste."

"He used to have a Zeltron girlfriend. Don't underestimate him," Esera said, scowling at the princess. What kind of woman came aboard someone else's ship, someone else's home, and insulted them like this? If Sellero didn't straighten up her act on her own, Esera would have to make her.

"You misunderstand my relationship with Commander Voyan, your highness," said Purity. "While he played a major role in my development and I trust he will take care of me, I do not see him as a sexual or romantic partner, nor as my father."

"All I did was say she should be pretty..." Voyan muttered.

"Well, this is an interesting ship!" Samé Sellero said, eyes agleam. "Captain Buna, my old nemesis. Lady Esera of Raxus, a Separatist diplomat. Commander Voyan, the Zeltron-tamer. And Purity Alpha, the very illegal and very stunning biodroid. I also see a Skakoan of great size and two of the droid general's warriors. What's next, a Jedi?" The princess threw back her head and laughed, her crew joining her, but for a bemused Trapper Wolf.

Voyan's eyes flicked over to Esera. *Do we tell her?*

Esera shook her head, unclear if she'd heard Voyan's thought or not. *I'm more worried about Grievous hearing himself called a droid when he reviews what his guards are recording...*

As it turned out, Sellero had all the money she was promised, and her GR-45 began its descent to the planet, where Sanya would make sure Sellero was true to *her* promise.

"Just another run back to Raxus, General?" asked Captain Dofine, slouched in his captain's chair. "This route is the only one we ever take. I'm starting to miss the battles."

"Hah," Grievous huffed, his eyes focused on the heads-up display reading the latest report from Minntooine:

General, the redesign of Oceana*'s engineering section has produced a workable result. The forty-third ship of the series will be the first ship this new design can be implemented without any delay.* Signed, the head engineer of the design committee.

Grievous didn't bother replying to them. Forty-three ships would have the flaw that subjected them to immense vibrations due to resonance in the framing, whatever that meant. Forty-three ships didn't mean much, compared to the tens of thousands of other first-rate warships currently in active service. Intelligence believed the Republic had over one hundred *Imperators* and fifty *Tectors* operational. Drops in the proverbial bucket for them as well, but not insignificant. With the *Imperator* program slowly coming online again, there would only be more of them in the future. But that was the key to *Oceana,* the one principle everything had been compromised for: for every *Imperator* or *Tector* built, almost two *Oceana*s could be built at the same time with the same materials. *Almost* two. Grievous hoped that ratio could be shifted further in the future, but for a ship that'd gone from concept to tangible machine in less than half a year, it was good enough. These first forty-three ships could take up position in orbital defense fleets where they wouldn't need to do much accelerating, freeing up less troublesome vessels for front-line service. They'd need it, soon.

"We'll be going to war again before you know it, Captain," Grievous told Dofine. "Enjoy these days of peace while they last."

Despite the past four months having seen the highest losses of Republic shipping tonnage since the war began, Tarkin's war machine was slowly lurching back to life. More and more supplies were getting through to the forward bases, despite the ferocity of Separatist commerce raiders. Republic tonnage destroyed was dropping by the week. At Ord Mantell, at Roche, and at Eriadu, the enemy stockpiled and prepared. Three daggers Grievous could not ignore, but could not touch, either. Tarkin was proving a far more capable enemy than Mas Amedda, or even Sheev Palpatine-

But Sheev Palpatine was Sidious. He was holding back. Tarkin would never be as dangerous as Sidious. Against Sidious, there never would have been a hope for victory. Even with all of Tarkin's power, he was just a man, not a Sith. Grievous could defeat a mortal man.

However, he couldn't do it alone.

A general's greatest challenge was keeping his armies operating. Anyone could win a battle, but it took a professional to set the stage for victory. A droid army cut out some of the great hurdles, food and medicine in particular, but fuel, spare parts, reinforcements, and more still needed to flow to the front lines. Grievous had been juggling the myriad of differing requirements the Confederacy's slap-dash military created from a thousand different fleets and armies needed fulfilled for nearly four years now. *If only we could standardize,* he'd often think, but there was neither time nor political will. But at least there was political will to keep Grievous's own war machine alive. Sort of.

That was where the help came in. Grievous's first appointment on Raxus would be with one of Komara's friends, a pair of Sephi twins, Lirka and Sirka Vantiales. They weren't all that much older than Komara, Grievous figured, but they were both easily a head taller, with silky dark hair down to their knees. *Impractical,* Grievous thought, when he saw them. Which was strange, because their rural retreat had a wood-burning fireplace, which was extremely practical.

"Peace be upon you, General Grievous," said one of the Sephi girls, as they both bowed. "I am Lirka of the house Vantiales."

"And I am Sirka of the house Vantiales," said the other.

Grievous's implanted computers scanned both their faces. They were identical. "I will not bother keeping your names straight," he told them. "I am here because I require... guidance, on dealing with this so-called Oversight Committee you civilians have invented."

"Ah, yes, the committee!" said Lirka. "Please, sit, General."

Grievous thought of how silly he'd look sitting on these padded pieces of furniture, flanked by his magnaguards. He folded his arms behind his back, and sunk into his usual stoop.

"Or not..." Sirka muttered.

"The committee," Grievous said.

Lirka cleared her throat. "There's been concern in Congress over how you spent the one trillion credits you requested," she said. "These credits didn't come out of thin air; they're loans from the various governments and organizations that constitute Congress. That means they need to be paid back."

"I know what loans are," said Grievous, glaring at the two. They shrunk back.

"The problem is, we *can't* pay them back at the moment. The Confederacy cannot tax its constituent systems, that's in our constitution. Therefore the Oversight Committee was formed from the primary donors to the cause, to ensure their money is being put to good use. They wish to audit the military expenditures-"

Grievous growled. "They want to *audit* me as I fight for their survival?"

Sirka laughed, nervously. "Maybe audit is a strong word? They want to know where their money is going, that's all. Maybe see if it can be spent more efficiently."

"I should kill them all," said Grievous. One of his hands drifted to a lightsaber.

The other Sephi sighed. "Esera said you'd be cross when we told you."

Komara ought to mind her own business! thought Grievous. "Tell me what you wish to tell me, Sephi. How do I deal with this committee without violence?" If he'd still had a mouth, he was sure it'd have tasted foul at those words. *I do not have time for committees!*

"Well, you said it yourself, General: play up how you're fighting for their survival. Tell them about how expensive it is to run a galactic war. You know, things like that," Sirka said. Lirka nodded along.

"Yes, things like that!" she said. "Defeating Tarkin isn't something you can do on a budget, right?"

The Sephi gave him some other tips, but Grievous didn't think he'd heed them. He was going to make it clear to this committee that they had no business snooping around into how he ran their war.

Diplomacy and dinner went hand in hand, even if the woman on the other end of the table was a pirate. Princess Samé Sellero's table manners weren't at all princess-like. She put her feet up on the table, legs crossed just enough to keep her barely decent in that short skirt, a glass of Esera's own Crookpine Black in her hand. *I'm starting to hate this woman,* Esera thought, feeling not at all exposed in her ankle-length skirt and collar just below her chin.

"So, you've got a Zygerrian cook?" asked Sellero. "That's good, I've always been partial to Zygerrian."

"Alize is one of the best," Esera said. "Bo-Katan Kryze, the regent of Mandalore, wishes to hire you for an additional job."

"Is that so?" Sellero looked to the men of her crew she'd brought along, including the hapless, red-faced Trapper Wolf serving as a clerk, who was looking anywhere but the princess's bare thighs. That boy really hadn't known what he was getting into. The other two men, Crede and Lelin, were her lieutenants, and probably bodyguards too. Crede was broad and dark, Lelin was slimmer and pale, but both looked like they could have beat up anyone on *Encounter* in a fistfight, Buna and Murshida excluded, at least.

Esera had her boys with her, too: Voyan for the technical expertise, and Shau Meo, for eye candy to distract Sellero, as Voyan explained it to the Felinian. Purity was her third, who stood at her back, ever watchful.

"Money's money," Lelin said.

"We could always use more," agreed Crede.

"Okay, what's the job?" Sellero asked.

"Security," said Esera. "Kryze doesn't trust the Republic's clones, and she doesn't want to send a different message with my droids and I." *Not that I have many droids in the first place.* "She wants someone to watch the backs of the Mandalorians when they meet, so no one fears betrayal by another clan."

"I'll send *my* droids, then." The pirate princess grinned. She slid a holoprojector across the table. "Check these out. I've got a whole company of GX1-series battle droids, custom refits. Blasters, vibro-blades, flamethrowers, wrist rockets, you name it. They'd wipe the floor with a battalion of your trashy B1s, Separatist."

"Perhaps," Esera said. She looked at her engineer.

"The GX1 is a capable model," said Voyan. "I'd like to know where her highness found an entire company. They're amazing machines, one of the few series that's capable of outfighting your average Baktoid product. Give Grievous an army of those and he'd have won three years ago."

"A man of taste and culture, I see." Sellero raised her glass of wine to Voyan, who raised his back at her. Esera tried not to roll her eyes. "But I suppose I should salute your taste too, Lady Komara. That kitten of yours is adorable."

Shau Meo's ears went flat, and he turned as red as Trapper Wolf currently was. "Thank you, your highness," he squeaked.

So, she is distracted! Esera struggled to keep a smirk off her face.

"Where'd you get him?" The princess shifted in her seat, giving Meo an appraising look. "Perhaps he's the benefit of traveling with Zygerrians?"

The implications took a moment to hit Esera, and she scowled when they did. "Ensign Shau Meo is a vital crewman of this ship. He is a free man and is here of his own will."

"You know my people?" asked the Felinian. Sellero shrugged.

"Maybe? I've seen creatures like you in the markets for the last year or so. Not that I'm into such things, mind you. A lot of Zygerrian slavers who fled that Stratusist revolution ended up prowling in Hutt Space. They must have found whatever planet your kind come from not long after."

Stratusist revolution? What's she talking- oh. Necho Tanat had been in league with the Jabimiis, Alto Stratus being their late leader. A sick feeling settled in Esera's stomach. *That was me,* she realized. *I sent those slavers fleeing into Hutt Space. I put them on the path to find the Felinians.* She thought she'd done good, ending slavery on Zygerria. But now there were not one, but two people on *Encounter* whose lives had been made worse by what she'd done.

"You okay, Lady Komara?" Sellero asked, peering at her over the rim of her wine glass. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Well, maybe you have, this ship is even older than mine! Shau Meo, a free man, huh? Why don't you join my crew, Shau. The pay is better, and so is the… *comradeship.*" The pirate princess laughed, and her lieutenants smirked. Trapper Wolf turned an even brighter shade of red.

"I'm quite happy here, your highness," said Meo.

I should send Sanya with them, thought Esera, *they're as gutter-brained as she is!* She cleared her throat, and sat up straighter. "If you're done admiring my navigator, I'd like to go over the specifics of the security arrangement on Mandalore-"

At that moment, Alize made her entrance, with a tray full of spiced rice and meat, accompanied by toasted flatbread and grilled vegetables. Esera hated to admit Sellero was a woman of taste, too, Zygerrian food had quickly become one of her favorite kinds of meal. Not as filling as her sister's hearty Stalimurian cooking, but Zygerrianss knew their way with spices.

"Princess, your meal is ready," the big woman said, managing a respectful bob of her head despite the burden in her arms.

Sellero's eyes flashed, and she sat up straighter too, smiling as she did. "You know, I could get used to this place. Cute kittens, service worthy of royalty, good food… Are you sure this is a warship, Lady Komara?"

"You have no idea," said Esera.

"Seems more like a pleasure barge to me!" The princess laughed, and so did her men. Even Trapper Wolf smiled a little. "Lady Komara is living large here, while the rest of the galaxy burns. I wish we had this luxury!"

Esera was left speechless, not just by the princess's own hypocrisy–she'd called *Encounter* run down repeatedly–but also by the accusation of living the high life while the war consumed whole planets. *You don't know a damn thing about us, little woman,* Esera thought, a dark look coming over her face. Her patience for Samé Sellero was wearing thin.

As if she knew, Sellero reached into her jacket for her case of deathsticks.

"No!" Esera said, more loudly than she meant.

"Habit," said Sellero, sliding the case away with a smirk. "Hey boys," she said to her men, "you can head down to the dirt tomorrow. I think I'll be fine with the lady alone, as long as I don't smoke." The princess laughed, and Esera glowered.

In a secured chamber in the Congress building in Raxulon, Grievous addressed the so-called Oversight Committee. "It will not be long until the Republic's offensives into the Outer Rim resume," he told them, pacing back and forth, hands behind his back. "My intelligence officers believe we have two months, at most, until Tarkin makes his move. I have also been warned that something is afoot in Hutt Space. Their intentions remain unknown, but it's clear they have no good will toward us."

Muwatt Hatti, the Skakoan Techno Union representative, nodded. "And how much money do you want this time, General?"

"All of it," Grievous said.

"General, you were given a *trillion* credits several months ago," Arris Rossum, the representative of the so-called Stark Sector, formerly the Corporate Sector, said. Her face was pale and drawn, and she clearly didn't want to be here any more than Grievous did. For very different reasons, most likely.

"Yes, and those trillion credits were put into an accelerated program for a new class of cruiser, the first of which will be in service in a matter of days," Grievous told her. "Your contributions were most helpful. If they were to stop, I might not be able to fight the war effectively. And then you would all find yourselves staring down Republic blaster barrels within a week."

"Well, that may be true…" began Mik Regrap of the Trade Federation, but Grievous stared at her with such intensity she simply trailed off.

"You cannot win without me," he told them. "I cannot win without your financial resources. But we both want to win. This is a simple problem with a simple solution. Why does this elude you?"

"Do you propose we equip your armies and fleets… for *free?*" asked Hatti. Behind his mask and goggles, the Skakoan could have had any expression, but Grievous had a hunch the man was taken aback.

"What do you value more? Your wealth, or your life?" Grievous asked them all.

"But we would be bankrupt-"

"I do not know what that word means, nor do I care." In fact, Grievous *did* know what bankruptcy was, but in a life or death situation, worrying about something as trivial as material wealth was beyond foolish. "What I do know is that you came here to put me on a leash made of money."

"That's not it!" Rossum said quickly. "We want more accountability, that's all-"

"But I cannot be leashed," Grievous went on. "I do not care about your wealth, I do not care about your accounts and your debts and your…" Something Komara had mentioned once tickled at his mind. "… liquid assets. I care about winning your war, by any means necessary. If you cannot stomach that, then you can always throw yourself on Tarkin's mercy."

No one laughed. The Skakoan found his bravery first:

"General, even if we charge the Confederacy nothing for our services, what about our own supply lines? Many of our facilities rely on neutral systems for raw materials and shipping…"

Under Grievous's glare, Muwat Hatti fell silent. He laid it out clearly for the civilians: "If we win, you may rebuild your wealth. If we lose, you will be dead, and all the money in the universe will not save you. Give me what I need, and I will save your lives. Refuse me what I need, and I will laugh as Tarkin hangs you from the branches of the kunbal tree."

The so-called committee sat in silence, refusing to look at him or each other. *Did they really think this would end any other way?* Grievous wondered. They probably didn't even know what a kunbal tree was. After a moment of reflection, Grievous wasn't quite sure he knew either. The phrase had popped into his mind and felt right.

"General-" Hatti started up again, but his voice had a tone that told Grievous everything he needed to know.

"Why can't you be more like Wat Tambor?" Grievous asked him. "Tambor was willing to die for the cause, when the Jedi cornered him. Tambor believes in the *divine providence* supporting our endeavor. But you, Hatti, what do you believe in? Money? Bah!" Grievous snorted, and turned his back on them. "I will go to the Techno Union and Trade Federation leadership themselves. I am wasting my time with you politicians."

What am I even looking at? wondered Sanya, as the pirates and their droids unloaded the transport's cargo. She knew what the ship carried, but the pirates fascinated her. They were all Humans, with the slim majority being men, dressed in a manner that managed to be both flashy and worn. Sleeveless shirts and jackets showed off tattooed arms, gold chains hung from scratched belts, gaudy rings adorned fingers stained with oil and grease.

"Move it, you useless scum!" bellowed one of the pirates, a hulking Human male of the darker variety. "What are we even paying you for!? The Princess wants all this junk on dirt before the next watch!"

"Hey man, we're going as fast as we can load the droids!" said a scrawny red-haired Human. "If you've got a problem, take it up with Veriline, they programmed these scrap heaps, not us!"

"I don't want excuses, Meecha!"

"Do you want to do this, Crede?" Meecha asked. He ducked his head as Crede swung a meaty hand at him.

"Take it easy, man!" another one of the pirate workers yelled, a short scamp of a Human. He peeked out from behind a crate of a soil-tilling machine. "We'll get it done when we've got it done, no sweat!"

"Then *get it done,* Bondo!" Crede told him. "The longer we're on dirt the more we risk getting blown to bits by that star destroyer! And if you think I'm cruel, wait until Lelin gets angry!"

Sanya had never been around pirates before. The utter lack of military discipline was startling, after three and a half years of working in the proximity of clones. The Mandalorians were just as baffled by what they were seeing. A culture that prided itself on honor and discipline were just as fascinated by these strangers. *Probably horrified, too,* Sanya thought.

"Problems with your warriors?" Rahab of Tenau asked Crede.

The big man sighed. "We picked up these scrapper kids at Lotho Minor a few months back. They're having trouble adjusting to life in the Princess's fleet. The House of Sellero has truly fallen on hard times, having to resort to recruiting such whelps…"

"What fleet?" asked Sanya. "I heard you only had two ships bigger than snubfighters." She gave a glance at the orbiting Z-95 in the distance. Just in case the Republic turned up.

Crede scowled, and crossed his arms. "As long as a single vessel bears the sigil of her highness, the Sellero Fleet will still exist."

"That's the first understandable thing I've heard out of you pirates," said Rahab. "Honor the clan above all else, right?"

"Yes, it does sound like that, doesn't it?" The young Tenau warrior's remark earned her a slight smile from Crede. Whatever else he was going to say was lost when the Z-95 broke off from its orbit and came in for a landing. The big pirate huffed. "What is that idiot doing *now?*"

The Z-95 came down at a sharp angle. One engine was smoking. Sanya thought it was going to crash, until its nose pitched up and the three working engines flared. The ship dropped down the remaining few meters gently. For lack of anything better to do, Sanya and Rahab followed him up to the spooling-down fighter, parked precariously on a patch of rock that rose above the white sandy wasteland beyond the restored region.

"Trapper Wolf!" Crede said, in a sharp voice. "Who gave you permission to land?"

From the opening canopy came a response: "Engine two's read-out is lit up like a Wookiee Life Day tree, boss! I told you the turbo impeller was toast!"

Crede slapped a hand over his face. "And Judow told me he fixed it!" The pirate lieutenant stormed off in the direction of the landed freighter.

"I don't think your fleet is doing well," Sanya said to Wolf.

"Yeah," said Rahab, "you guys look like the pirates my father fights for the Ciutricenes. Just a bunch of star-rabble."

The pilot removed his helmet, and slumped in his seat.

"Every single day, I wonder why I ever joined up with these clowns," he said. "Do you know what they told me? That Samé Sellero was a real Naboo princess with real Naboo money. Do you know how much I've been paid in the last eight months?"

Sanya shrugged. "I don't know anything about salaries."

"I've been paid two hundred peggats. *Two hundred!*" Wolf slammed a fist on the side of his Z-95, and then winced and shook out his hand. "That's like one tenth of what I could have been making back home, if I'd just become a commercial pilot like my teachers said!"

"That's rough, buddy," Sanya said.

"Sellero can't be that good of a leader if she's struggling to pay her warriors," said Rahab. "When Mandalorians do mercenary work, we always get paid. They're probably afraid of what we'd do to them if they short-changed us, though!" The big girl laughed.

"I don't even get paid in money. I'm on *Encounter* as Esera's guest, I get food and lodging for maintaining hydroponics," Sanya sighed.

"Who's Esera?" Wolf asked. "That, uh, shapely girl up on your destroyer? The one with the big…" He trailed off for a moment, realizing he was in female company, no doubt. Wolf blushed and looked at his control panel intently. "The one with the long skirt, that's what I meant to say."

"Yeah, that's her," said Sanya, biting back the urge to snicker. *The big what?* she wondered. Not chest, that was for sure. Where had Wolf's eyes wandered, up there? "Lady Esera Komara of Raxus. Also Captain Esera Komara of Confederate Naval Intelligence. Take your pick."

"A captain? *Her*?" Trapper Wolf looked incredulous. "She can't be older than me!"

"Yeah, I couldn't either at first," Rahab said. "She and I are about the same age, and I've just got my first ever command, *and* my uncle is constantly looking over my shoulder! That girl's got an entire starship, and no one is watching her!"

The pilot stroked his nascent beard. "That is one weird ship you've got, you know? The Princess brought Crede and Lelin to back her up at some kind of business dinner. I guess your Lady Komara got the wrong message because she brought her toys out, like it was a competition. Some skinny guy and this half-cat boy I thought was a girl at first."

Voyan? Shau? Esera's toys? Sanya burst into laughter, eyes tearing up almost doubling over. "You have *completely* the wrong idea about them!" she said, between fits of giggling. Trapper Wolf blushed, and Rahab probably was blushing too, even if her skin was too dark to show it.

"Toys?" Rahab asked. "Like, um… husbands?"

"Yeah, but not so formal. That's just the feeling I got, that's all," he muttered. Rahab didn't answer, and looked deep in thought. Mandalorian premarital chasteness and egalitarianism must have prevented Rahab from ever imagining such a scenario until now.

"Hey, you're right, *Encounter* is a weird ship," Sanya said, once she'd recovered. "And it's probably the most sexually repressed ship you've ever been on. You didn't even meet our celibate Zeltron mechanic."

"A celibate Zeltron? Good for her," said Wolf, nodding enthusiastically. "Zeltron culture is very exploitative, you know."

What!? How did she respond to that? What was the deal with this guy? Her confusion must have shown on her face, because Wolf went on:

"Did you know Zeltrons naturally emit pheromones that influence the emotions and moods of other Zeltrons? It's become commonplace for them to manipulate and coerce each other with these pheromones. The women are especially victims of this practice."

"Have you ever met a single Zeltron in your life?" asked Sanya.

"Well, no."

"Me either," said Rahab, but Sanya kept her focus on the pilot:

"Let me guess, Wolf, you're from a mostly Human-populated planet."

Wolf was silent for a moment. "Maybe," he said.

Sanya took a deep breath. "Buddy, you've got a lot to learn about the Galaxy. Get out of that starfighter, let's go get some drinks and start your education over. There's a Togruta girl flying out here from Sundari tomorrow, an old acquaintance of mine, and I don't want you embarrassing yourself in front of her like you just did in front of me, okay?"

"Uh, sure," Wolf said. He began to clumsily clamber out of the cockpit, and Sanya had the sense he was far from an experienced pilot. He'd aced that landing, though…

Grievous made good on his word to the toothless committee. He now had the heads of the Techno Union and Trade Federation in a conference call with him. The holograms of Foreman Wat Tambor and Viceroy Rune Haako sat opposite of him at a table.

"I will be blunt," Grievous told them. "The Confederacy's situation is not as good as I've made it out to be in the official reports to Congress."

The Neimoidian frowned, but Tambor nodded. "My statisticians have predicted this; this has been the Techno Union's conclusion for some time."

"You have a reason to talk to us personally, General?" asked Viceroy Haako.

"I was unable to exploit my victory at Kashyyyk as fully as I needed to," said Grievous. "Tarkin forced my hand before I was ready, at Ciutric and Vinsoth. We took losses we could ill-afford there. Now there are three offensives building up, at Ord Mantell, Roche, and Eriadu." A chart of the Galaxy appeared, with the lines in Republic red and Confederate blue, the three named systems highlighted. "My intelligence agents believe there will be a diversionary attack out of Hutt Space as well. It is likely Tarkin aims to split the northern sectors of the Confederacy into three parts, and crush our pocket centered around Sluis Van once and for all. If he succeeds, we've lost the war. There will be no coming back if we lose Sluis Van and the foundry-worlds coreward of the Tion Hegemony."

"This does not look good," Haako said. "Not at all."

"Have faith, Viceroy," Wat Tambor told him. "Providence has blessed our cause. We *will* triumph."

What does he mean? Grievous wondered. Was Providence a Skakoan god? Was that what the cruiser-carrier ships took their class name from? "It is clear to me that more radical measures are needed to bring this war to an acceptable conclusion. Your two conglomerates absorbed the traitors' holdings after the attempted coup, and even with the additional resources of the Stark Sector at our disposal, we are struggling to keep pace with the Republic's ability to rearm itself. Even with Palpatine's foolishness in his way, Tarkin's managed to begin mitigating his logistical losses to our raiders. Cretins like Hatti and Regrap are whining about their money, the civilians in Congress are whining about cost overruns and lack of fiscal responsibility-" Grievous had to growl, those words did not belong on a warrior's tongue. "It is folly! If I do not win, you die. If you die, you will not be able to enjoy the wealth you hoard so dearly. Do you understand this?"

The two corporate executives nodded. Tambor had a serious air to his posture, and Haako looked tired and resigned.

"What do you want from us?" the Viceroy asked.

"I will be drawing up a new… economic program," the words felt alien to even say, "to ensure the proper execution of this war," Grievous told them. "I will not be held back by mere *money* any longer. If you value your lives, you will agree to it, with no questions asked."

They swore they would, as those two at least knew what was best for them. Grievous hadn't been entirely honest with them, though still more honest than he'd been with Congress: Tarkin's coming offensives weren't guaranteed victories, even if nothing changed for the Separatists. Stockpiles were good to have, but an organized withdrawal through a series of prepared defenses would stretch the supply lines from the warriors to their stockpiles. The deep defense, Kaleesh had called it, in the huk war. Grievous preferred to attack, thus the new economic program, but he had alternatives in mind if he didn't get his way.

The question of Providence stuck in his mind for the rest of the day, especially when he checked in with Komara and her mission to Mandalore.

"We'll have everything finalized soon," said Komara. "The biggest problem at this point is that *Tector* shadowing us. My destroyer's only option is to flee if that thing makes a move."

"Is this a request for reinforcements?" asked Grievous.

"Yes," the girl said. "Get me a *Lucrehulk* or something that can stand up to firepower of that magnitude."

I have an idea, Grievous thought. "I will send you something else. It ought to be the *Tector*'s equal in firepower." *Oceana* and her first four sister-ships were commissioned into the navy. Their fitting-out wasn't entirely finished, still, but only tertiary systems remained.

"Alright then, a surprise for both of us here at Mandalore." Komara wasn't amused.

"I have a request of you, now: I need to speak with your Skakoan."

The once-Jedi blinked. "You what?"

"I need to speak with your Skakoan."

"Uh… okay… Hold on."

Never had Komara anticipated that Grievous might want to speak with one of her warriors. Soon, her hologram was replaced by Harak Murshida, the Cyber Guard who'd punted Yoda out of that tree on Kashyyyk several months ago.

"We meet again, warrior Murshida," Grievous said.

"Well met, General," said the Skakoan, with a respectful incline of his head.

"Tell me about Providence."

His request took Murshida off-guard as it had taken Komara. "I surmise that Captain Komara has told you my dabbling in the great mysteries, then. And that you have encountered one of my people who believes."

"Yes," said Grievous. "Wat Tambor, your leader."

"Wat Tambor is not my leader. His is the Foreman of the Techno Union, an organization independent from Skako," Murshida said. "Skakoans who hold faith to our ways tend not to leave our planet… by choice, at least. The Techno Union attracts adventurers and rogues."

"Yet Tambor speaks of Providence, and a divine mission. He does not sound so far off from you."

"When Tambor says this war is a divine mission, it is because he is looking at it from a devout Skakoan's perspective. The balance of the universe has been upset. The time has come to right it. I am sure many of my people support the war for that reason alone." Murshida paused, and his hologram leaned in, as if to whisper. "But the Techno Union is filled with atheists. They believe in nothing but profit margins. I am curious as to how Tambor became its head. I missed an eventful few decades in my exile, it seems."

"I knew it," Grievous growled. "That Hatti believes in nothing but money, just as I thought. Are all politicians *atheists?*" The word was new to him. He'd never heard it before- no, the computer connected to his brain dragged up an offhand remark from Dooku, made in private after some planetary sovereign denied the Force was anything more than simple psychokinetic power.

Murshida shook his head. "Good heavens, no! Ask around your congress, you will find many who believe in *something*, I am sure."

"And what do you Skakoans believe?" asked Grievous. "What are your gods? What do they demand of you? How can I gain their favor?"

Komara's Skakoan stared at him for a moment. "There is a degree of cultural misunderstanding at work here. How to put this…" Murshida took a thoughtful pose on his end of the transmission. "Gods, heaven, providence, these are imprecise translations of a Skakoan concept. Perhaps it might be better to use *god* in the singular. There aren't any better words for the creator of the universe. We believe that this creator is a non-localized phenomenon, something everywhere in physical reality at once. It is all-encompassing, all-binding, and yet, most are completely unaware of it. It does not speak to us as I do to you."

"I have a hard time believing in things I cannot see and that do not interact with me," Grievous said.

"That does not mean it is not there. If you cannot gaze into the sun, what makes you think you can gaze upon its creator?" Murshida asked.

Grievous lowered the lenses over his eyes that protected them when he went into space or toxic environments, and polarized them. He looked up at the sun over Raxulon, now just a dull orange ball in the darkness. "I'm gazing upon it right now," he said.

The Skakoan crossed his arms. "That does *not* count."

"It *does* count," said Grievous.

"You and Komara are two of a kind, General. Such insistent hotheadedness."

The lenses retracted, and Grievous stared at the hologram. *You see it too, mystic? Did your non-localized whatever tell you this?* In his youth, Grievous had been careful to always heed what holy men said. Murshida spoke like one of them, even if he didn't know his own people's gods.

"Keep a close eye on that girl, Skakoan," he said. "The gods have chosen her for something that even I cannot see the end of."

"I can keep an eye on her, but she keeps her own counsel. It is difficult to get her to speak on anything bothering her. But chosen, you say? I would not think the Kaleesh gods would choose a Human for anything," Murshida said.

"Bodies come and go, but the soul remains the same. She and I have met before. I once wondered who she'd been, back then. Now I know."

"And you will not say."

"I will not, because you would tell her."

"You are astute, General."

"I commend your loyalty, Murshida. This is one of my burdens to bear. The gods have given her enough to carry as it is, I must keep mine to myself. Your part is to watch her back, mystic."

"It was not by chance she came to my home," said Murshida. "I do not believe in chance. If your gods have put her to a quest, then so has mine, and I will play my part."

"To whatever end?"

"All things must die, General. Even me. Even you."

The certainty with which Murshida spoke stirred something in Grievous's heart. Not fear, no. It was anxiety. No matter what the gods did, a mortal's life was their own, and the gods could not lift so much as a feather without a mortal acting for them. They would not keep him on the path he walked; they would not keep him pointed at the purpose they had aimed him towards. And it was entirely possible to die before having fulfilled one's purpose. *That* was a thought that did not sit easily with him.

One by one, the leading men and women of Mandalore appeared via hologram in *Encounter*'s communications room. Esera and Samé Sellero were the only ones present in the flesh up here. The likes of Bo-Katan Kryze, Kentaroh of the Dusala, and Rahab of Tenau, were expected, but Esera's breath still caught when the elusive Rook Kast tuned in. Many icy glances were exchanged between the holograms. Esera wasn't in the mood for any funny business, she'd hardly slept, and when she finally had, she'd dreamed of places she never wanted to return to.

"Mandalorians," began Esera, having to stifle a yawn, "this is Princess Samé Sellero of Penhalla. Since none of you could agree on who would provide security for the upcoming meeting, she will be. The Princess has no interest in Mandalore or its affairs, and quite honestly, I think she'd rather be a thousand light years away from here right now."

"You can say that again," Sellero grumbled.

"If anyone objects to the Princess's security forces providing a perimeter, now's the time to speak," Esera said.

The Mandalorians looked at each other, but none spoke.

"Good. In forty-eight hours we will be meeting at the following coordinates under Sundari. The Princess and her troops will secure the location beforehand, along with myself and my most trusted warriors. No one will be ambushing anyone else, is that clear?"

"You do not rule on Mandalore, Komara," Kryze said.

"Neither do you, Kryze," said Rook Kast.

The two looked about to fly at each other over hologram, but Esera took the initiative. "If you barbarians ever want your planet unified again, this is the only chance you're going to get for a generation. Are you going to throw it away in some contest of who's the tougher meathead?"

Once more, silence answered, now sullen.

"Good. I will repeat my terms. The Confederacy wants Republic beskar mining ceased at once. What you do with your ore is up to you. Grievous wants some of it for himself but that's not a requirement. Mandalore belongs to the Mandalorians, not the Senate. *That* is our interest in your affairs. *Those* are the terms you are agreeing to, for my help in facilitating a settlement to the Mandalorian issue."

"These terms are… acceptable," Kryze nearly spat.

"Agreed," said Kentaroh.

"Agreed," said Rahab.

And so they went around in a circle, until Rook Kast was the only one left: "This is the *last* time I work with Separatists," she said. "Agreed."

Esera cut the transmission off. "I hate Mandalorians," she said to Sellero.

The princess gave her a smug smirk. "Too rough and tumble for a delicate Raxian noblewoman?"

"Too hardheaded and stupid, more like it." Esera felt the urge to yawn, and this time didn't fight it.

"Let me guess, this ship doesn't have triple down mattresses," said Sellero.

"I don't sleep well these days, no matter the mattress," Esera told her.

"Afraid a mynock is going to fall through the ceiling, in a dump like this? Must be nothing like your Raxus palace."

For a moment, revealing her credentials as an almost four year veteran of the clone war was appealing. But Esera held back. This up-jumped pirate wasn't worth the effort of taking seriously. "For a princess, you sure like to go after my noble title," she said.

"The nobles of Naboo betrayed my father, the *rightful* king. I'm not a fan of you lot."

"Yes, because I, an eighteen-year old Raxian, am related to the Naboo plot to kick your father off the throne eighty years ago." Esera gave her a flat stare.

"It was forty-one years ago!" Sellero huffed, hands on her hips.

"Whatever, old lady. I don't care about ancient history."

"I am *not* an old lady!" Through the Force, Esera could feel the pirate princess was genuinely upset. *Good,* she thought.

"It's not fun when other people make up things about you, is it?" Esera asked her. "You'd think a woman in her thirties would have learned that by now. Go back to your dinky pirate ship, I'm too busy to be putting up with you."

"You dumb little girl," growled Sellero, clenching her fists. "You think you can treat me like this? I am royalty! I am a warrior, I am a pirate! Everything I've got, I took, because this whole Galaxy is against me. I've been at war since you were a baby! What have you ever done? What have you ever lost? Who the hell do you think you are?"

What have you ever lost?

A calm fury erupted in Esera's heart at those words. Of all the things Sellero could have said, that was the worst possible thing. Esera stared, incredulous, disbelieving. This pirate had the gall to say such things to *her*. She'd tried to play nice, she'd tried to be polite, but like always, it got her nowhere. This princess brat had gotten under her skin, just like those horrible Emberlener women had, and unlike that time, Voyan wasn't around to calm Esera down. *Don't lose control,* she told herself, *just stay calm…*

"I'm a woman who could physically throw you off my ship, if you keep pushing me," Esera said. It was a warning, and Sellero didn't take it.

"Throw me off your garbage scow? I'd like to see you try! Some pampered noble girl like you couldn't fight your way out of a plastic bag! I'm gonna-" Sellero's hand balled into a fist, she stepped forward, and Esera's lightsaber was dropping down from her sleeve before she knew what she was doing. The green blade blazed to life, its tip pointed at Sellero's throat.

"You're gonna what?" asked Esera. "Make your little jokes some more? Attack me on my own ship? Go on, make a move, see what happens."

Sellero's eyes were wide, shock and horror seeped out of her in the Force. "Okay- okay, maybe I went too far there," she said, in a voice that suddenly trembled, "I got a little heated, okay? Clearly you're more than what you look like. I messed up. Just put the lasersword away, I'll get off your ship."

"Incredible. Even with your life in my hands, you still won't apologize." She inched the lightsaber closer to Sellero's throat. Somewhere, deep in the back of her mind, Esera felt a call she hadn't felt in months. Holding such power over another living being, knowing she could end this woman's life with a flick of her wrist… it felt good. Too late, Sellero saw just who she'd been messing with. The fear in that woman's soul made Esera want to cackle. The dark side called. It wanted her to chase that wickedly joyous feeling, let it fill her, consume her! That emptiness inside her could be filled by the greatest pleasure, all she had to do was kill- *No,* said Esera to herself. She tried to apply Master Dooku's lessons left behind in the holocron: *I'm not doing this because I like it. I'm doing this because I'm angry. I'm angry because…*

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Sellero whined, her back against the bulkhead now, hands in the air. "Is that what you want to hear? I'm sorry!"

"No one ever takes me seriously," said Esera, answering her own thoughts. "I'm just a dumb little girl, until this sword comes out. No one wants to talk, no one wants to try to understand each other; they all just want to fight. Violence is the only language people like you will hear. I'm sick of it, princess. I really am." She still didn't lower the blade. Esera looked at the shimmering green plasma. "Is this really what it takes to get you people to finally listen? Why do I need to resort to this every single time? I just want respect, princess. I don't want to hurt anyone. But no one will respect me unless I can hurt them. Why is that?"

"You're really not threatening!" Sellero blurted out. "You were just a kinda chubby highborn girl in a dress until you pulled that lasersword out! I had no idea!"

"I'm actually from Stalimur," said Esera, as she frowned. "It's a very cold planet. But I assure you, I'm in perfect fighting shape."

"I've never heard of Stalimur in my entire life," said Sellero, drops of sweat rolling down her face. "Look, I believe you! I don't know if you're a Jedi or what, but I believe you! You win, Komara! I'm sorry!"

"Good," said Esera. "You know, I can't stop thinking about how easily I could kill you, princess. A flick of my wrist and it's all over for you. I wouldn't even feel it, you know. In the Force, I mean. When I was younger I could feel every death near me, like a meteor in the sea. Now… there's nothing there. Not even a pebble in a puddle. There's a little voice inside me that says I could start feeling good when I kill, instead of just numb. I'm ignoring it, but it's there. I'm not saying this to scare you. I just want you to know, I've lost things too, in my war. I think it's important we understand each other."

"Yes, I agree!" Sellero nodded, head bobbing up and down. "I get it now, I understand you!"

Esera turned off the lightsaber, and took a deep breath that turned into another yawn. "Alright, then. This discussion stays between us, alright?"

"Yes, of course!" squeaked Sellero, her face as pale as snow.

"Behave yourself, princess. Our work isn't done yet." Esera stepped aside, and Sellero bolted from the room. Shortly after, Purity stuck her head in.

"Is everything alright, Captain?" she asked. Her golden eyes were fixed on the lightsaber hilt in Esera's left hand. It'd started shaking, as the adrenaline left her blood.

"What does it say about us, Purity, that we need to be threatening to have our voices heard?" she asked the biodroid in turn.

"It says that organic civilization is built on the monopoly of violence, and that your kind has not progressed from the age of caves and wheels as much as you would like to think," said Purity. "I take it her highness challenged your monopoly of violence aboard this vessel? I hope you didn't hurt her. I quite like her."

"Yes, she challenged me," Esera said. "It didn't end like she thought it would. I didn't hurt her, but I scared her straight. She didn't expect me to have backbone. I'm not threatening, apparently."

Purity gave her a bright smile. "Your facial features are non-threatening for your species, Captain. Statistically they inspire trust and relaxation, especially in younger Humans. You would be well-suited to being a caretaker."

Esera stared at the lightsaber hilt in her hand. She thought of the memories that kept her up so long, some nights. And she recalled that sick feeling of twisted glee as she'd been a moment from killing Sellero. Slowly, but surely, she followed in Grievous's footsteps. "Maybe in another life, Purity. I'm on a different path."

The Mandalorians were a straight-laced culture, but even they knew how to have fun. The Dusala village had a variety of wines and ales, products of the rehabilitated landscape around them. Sanya and Trapper Wolf, her momentary drinking buddy, had discovered just how skilled the Mandalorians could be in the arts of fermentation and brewery.

"You two are such lightweights," Rahab told them the next morning, as their heads pounded. "You barely had anything!"

"Please, not so loud," Sanya sighed.

"I'm never drinking again," Wolf said, groaning as he clutched his head.

"Yeah, I said that too once!" Rahab laughed, and clapped them both on the back. "Eat hearty, friends, and drink lots of water!"

Later in the day, and Sanya was thankful that it was later, Ahsoka Tano arrived from Sundari. Her official business was with Kentaroh, sorting out details of the upcoming meeting or something boring like that. It wasn't until the afternoon when Sanya managed to intercept her.

"Hey, Tano!" she called.

"Uh, hey," said the Togruta girl. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah! We were at the Temple together. Like, seven years ago," said Sanya.

Tano stared, before recognition lit up her eyes. "I *do* know you, don't I?" She looked away for a moment. "Uh, I forgot your name."

"Sanya. I'm Sanya. Esera's… friend. Remember?"

"Oh! You're the Devaronian girl she always followed around?"

"Yep!" Sanya smiled to hide the awkward grimace that'd otherwise be on her face. She gestured to the Human boy beside her. "And this is Trapper Wolf, a pirate!"

"Hi," said Tano, giving him a wave.

"Hey," Wolf squeaked. His eyes were wide and cheeks burning. Sanya didn't need to be a full-powered Jedi to sense the sudden fascination that'd come over Wolf. *He likes what he sees, huh? Why not help a friend out?*

"Wolf here flies starfighters," said Sanya. "You should have seen the emergency landing he did yesterday, it was a hell of a touchdown." There was more than a little truth there; Sanya had been impressed at Wolf's prompt and clean landing. The Togruta would sense no deception from Sanya.

"Cool," said Tano, blank-faced.

"It was nothing, really," Wolf mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

Before anything else was said, some of the other pirates interrupted their meeting.

"Hey, Trapper! Stop hogging all the girls!" Meecha, the young cargo handler Sanya had seen yesterday, said. His friend, Bondo, was with him. They'd just finished moving an industrial water purifier into the village, and were on their way back to the freighter.

"You gotta introduce us to your new friends!" he said.

There was a third following, taller than them, and by far the most handsome of the quartet of Human boys present. "Settle down, guys," he said. "Desperation isn't attractive."

"Shut up, Judow, you're only saying that because you're *her highness's* favorite!" said Meecha.

"Yeah, man, that's why you never get yelled at or hit like we do!" agreed Bondo. He pointed to a red mark on his cheek. "See this? Lelin's *correction,* he called it!"

"I actually do my job, you boneheads," Judow told them. "Ever think of trying that for yourselves?" Meecha and Bondo glared at him sullenly, and Trapper Wolf just sighed.

"You didn't even fix my ship, you junkyard rat," he muttered under his breath. Sanya stifled a giggle.

"Quite the contentious group," said Tano. "So, uh, you're the pirates delivering the… stuff?"

"Several hundred tons of equipment. I don't know what this Komara lady is up to, but this is heavy-duty gear," Judow said. "But hey, she's paying in cash, we can't complain!"

"Actually we can complain," said Meecha, finger raised. "We are worked to the bone day and night, and we haven't seen a single credit of that cash!"

"It's called having a job, Meecha," Judow said. "Do you want to go back to that junk-heap planet?"

"At least no one was telling us what to do back there," said Bondo. Meecha nodded, arms crossed.

"Yeah! I've had it with these fake Naboo pirates, I swear I'm gonna- I'm gonna-"

"Do something really stupid?" guessed Trapper Wolf.

"More like something really clever," Meecha said. "Have fun with that dork from Gatalenta, Judow, your *real* friends are going back to work now."

"Don't sweat too much!" Judow called after them.

"What a pair of tools," said Wolf.

"No kidding." Tano nodded, giving the retreating duo a bemused look.

"How old are you guys, anyway?" asked Sanya. "Those two can't be more than sixteen."

"Hey, sixteen's adulthood back home," Judow said. "Not that anyone knows when they were born on Lotho Minor. It's that place in the Galaxy where all the trash that fell through the cracks gathers up. Old enough to shave? You're an adult, congratulations."

"Sounds rough," said Tano.

"We had freedom… No money, though!" The boy laughed. "Samé- uh, the Princess's people had money and they needed able bodies. Those two will get used to this life soon enough. I hope."

Judow went off too, leaving the original three in the dust of Dusala village. "He really is the Princess's favorite," Wolf said. He gave Tano a glance; his cheeks went pink again. "I better get going. If that rat isn't going to fix my ship, I've gotta do it myself. Uh, see you two around."

"Nice meeting you, Wolf," said Tano.

"You too," he stammered, and rushed away.

Sanya giggled. "It's nice being around normal people again. It really is."

"Let me guess, somehow you ended up flying with Esera, that skinny Separatist guy, and Zule Xiss," said Tano. "Do I even want to know how that happened?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you if you tell me why you tried to arrest Miha Voyan- that skinny Separatist guy. Seriously, what did he even do? Was it street racing? I know he used to race."

The Togruta cringed. "That was not my proudest moment, Sanya. Look, I'll tell you. And then you tell me how you ended up with that gang of misfits, okay?"

"Deal!"

Once again, Sanya spent her evening drinking with an acquaintance she hardly knew. Unlike last night, though, Princess Samé Sellero herself made an appearance. She swept into the Dusala village alehouse, and beelined for the only non-Humans inside. Sellero was a small woman, as small as Sanya, but her lifted boots, big coat, and peaked cap certainly added to her impression. The princess came right up to their table, and slammed her hands on it.

"Which one of you is Sanya?" she asked. "I know she's an alien, so it's gotta be one of you two!"

"That's me," said Sanya. Neither she nor Ahsoka were impressed by being called alien.

"That Komara woman is *insane!*" Sellero hissed. Her knuckles were white in her clenched fists. "You follow that… that… monster?"

"Monster?" repeated Ahsoka, eyebrow raised.

"What the hell did you do to Esera?" asked Sanya.

"We were just having some banter, and she pulled a lasersword on me! Did you know she has one of those things, like she's a damn Jedi or something? She went on this long rant about understanding or something, and how she doesn't feel the spirit of death or whatever! And then, when I thought she couldn't get crazier, she starts talking about a voice in her head! A voice telling her to *kill* me!" The pirate princess was aghast at her own tale. "Can you believe this? Do you follow this madwoman?"

"Okay, hold on." Sanya raised her hands. She'd been about to tell Sellero that her banter must have been more than that to make Esera angry, but… the Esera of today was not the Esera of her childhood. And *not feeling the spirit of death* sounded like… a laywoman's corruption of something Esera had said to Sanya herself, just a few days ago: she could no longer feel death in the Force. That wasn't something Sellero could make up. So if this all happened as the princess claimed, that meant Esera really had been hearing a voice.

All these thoughts seemed to have run through Ahsoka's mind too, because she gave Sanya a worried look. "Sanya, Esera's let the dark side take her before. It's how she lost a hand to me."

"Okay, princess, I'm gonna ask you this again," Sanya said. "What the hell did you do to Esera?"

"Nothing…" Sellero took a step back. "Nothing at all. I thought we were going to have a traditional duel, using our hands and feet, like women of honor. *She* took out the lasersword, and started rambling about voices in her head. You're not getting me in the same room as that crazy girl again, let me tell you! If I didn't need her money, I'd bail on this security job we've got tomorrow!"

Sanya let out a long sigh. *Alright, Esera, looks like my punishment is over as of tomorrow, because we need to talk.*

"*General, we're receiving a transmission from the western continent*," the voice on commlink said.

"The west? That's where…" Potkin shook her head, ridding herself of the last vestiges of sleep. "Put it through, officer."

In her simple, modest sleeping robe, Potkin did not look like a general. But one didn't need a uniform to command respect. She stood up straight, shoulders squared, hands behind her back, her face set in stone. The hologram projector activated, and two boys appeared.

"You have General Shadday Potkin. Who are you?" she asked the youths. *How did these children get in contact with us?*

"We're pirates, lady!" said the lanky boy.

"Yeah," said the stocky one. "We came here with that Sellero woman!"

"Ah, the one the Hutts put a bounty on. I'm not surprised the pirate would hire children."

"We're not children!" the lanky one snapped.

Potkin stared at them; face as hard as steel, and even through the hologram the children lost some of their bluster.

"Look, I'm Meecha, this is Bondo," the lanky one said, pointing at the stocky one. "We're working day in and day out for these pirates, they don't pay us, we're sick of it. I'm thinking, we cut a deal with the Republic. We want money. We can give you information."

"Oh?" asked Potkin. "You have my attention. Try me."

"There's a meeting tomorrow-" said Bondo, but Meecha put his hand over his mouth.

"You idiot! Get paid, *then* tell them, that was the plan!"

"Boys, I already knew about this Mandalorian meeting," Potkin said. In fact, she had an entire assault on it planned. But in the Force, she'd known a better opportunity was coming. Were these two fools it? She had to believe. "I've got fifty thousand credits in cash in this ship's vault, just for situations like this. It's all yours… if you tell me everything you know."

The greed in their eyes was apparent even through the hologram transmission.

"Okay, so there's these tunnels under the city-" Bondo started.

"I'm aware," said Potkin.

"But did you know we're providing security for them?" asked Meecha.

That was new. "Now you're talking business, kid," Potkin said.

Meecha grinned. "Sellero's got a company of GX1 battle droids. Real tough. Your clone troopers are in for a nasty surprise down in those tunnels. But, if someone were to put them on standby mode tomorrow…"

"I have a better idea," said Potkin. "Get me access to their network in the next twelve hours and I'll pay you a *hundred* thousand credits."

"You got yourself a deal, general lady!" said Bondo. The two youths were almost dancing with excitement.

After the details had been set, Potkin visited the bridge of *Daring.* "Can you trace where that call came from?" she asked the comms officer.

"It came from one of the pirate Z-95s down on the western continent," said the officer. "They were using a Republic encryption… an old one, from before the war. I can't imagine where they got that software."

"They're pirates, where do you think they got it?" asked Potkin. "Could the rebel destroyer have picked that up?"

"No, General. They're on the other side of the planet. Whoever called us had good timing."

So this wasn't a trick, these kids are really about to stab their own crew in the back. Potkin always underestimated the power of greed among the materially-inclined. But she shouldn't have been surprised. They were just pirates, after all.

Author's notes and responses: Fire up "I Am All of Me" by Crush 40 because Esera's acting the edgelady! Pssh… Nothin personnel, princess… I apologize for the month-long delay (again), it turns out that detailed outlines actually make me write slower. Go figure. Some other plots (Obi-wan, Shaak Ti, Asajj Ventress) had to be pushed aside due to how long this chapter got. Trapper Wolf joins the elite ranks of Disney-canon characters to appear in this story; Sellero and the rest of her crew are OCs. The Princess is an expert at pushing people's buttons and I had lots of fun writing her. But could there be more to her than meets the eye? Read and find out... I hope you're all excited for Tarkin's field trip and whatever Shadday Potkin is up to next chapter, though, I know I am. And now to respond to some recent reviews of note:

Valued Reviewer ZakoBattledroid is at it again, he's got a lot of catch-up to do but his reviews are always full of insights no one else has pointed out (cough his chapter 41 review cough). I'm one of those dorks who actually puts themes and foreshadowing in his space wizard fanfiction, and I guess it takes another dork to pick up on that stuff?

To Valued Reviewer Firehawk1100: As we saw in chapter 38, the Republic fleet's remains at Kashyyyk are being scrapped, operational vessels among them. This is due to the very differing logistical needs of the star destroyers from Separatist ships, as well as doctrinal differences in warfare. Simply put, mass-deployment of *Venators* is more trouble than its worth to the CIS. The recycled material is fueling the *Oceana* cruiser program, those ships will be far more compatible with CIS doctrine and logistics than star destroyers.

To Valued Reviewer Jalusk: you are witnessed!

To Valued Actionboi LoveFight9000: You want more lightsaber fights, huh? Be careful what you wish for…

To Valued Reviewer zerkil: saying that you are inspired by my work is the greatest compliment a writer can receive. Thank you. Go forth and make art!

To the anonymous guest who left his criticisms on chapter 26: FINALLY, some legitimate critique! Thank you for not being afraid to call me out on things I didn't do well. You know what? I agree. If I could go back and do chapter 26 over again, I would have had Aspar legitimately survive the fight. Maybe Esera would be badly hurt (again) and Murshida had to choose between finishing him off or saving his new friend, and he'd save her of course, or there wouldn't be a story. Aspar is vital to the narrative (he kicks off the schism, after all), but I could have and should have been smarter about preserving him in a believable way. Well, I do plan to go over the first half of this story with a fine comb for the eventual posting on Ao3.

To the other anonymous guest who posted the so-called "final review" on the so-called "greatest work of littérature ever made:" kek

As always, thanks to my beta reader Corshy1 for finding all the dumb mistakes I gloss over in my own "editing." This slipped my mind in the last chapter but my beta reader has reminded me that my Rahab of Tenau is more than a little inspired by a character drawn by an artist with the handle DeputyRust (I take no responsibility if he's got NSFW art, look up at your own discretion). Remember when a certain vocal minority was angry about the shape of female Mandalorian armor? And the internet backlash created a character to spite that vocal minority? Yeah, I took that and rolled with it. Good artists borrow, great artists steal :^)

< Prev | 49. Chapter 49: Glass Towers | Next >

Name:

Type your review for this chapter here...

Post Review

Actions | Share | Follow/Favorite